10/22/69

Dick Moorsteen
Dan Ellsberg

Attached is a hastily dictated draft on which I would be most grateful for your frank comments and amendments. Scribble right on the draft if you like.

This is the sort of thing Dan has been encouraging me to do before I forget everything.

Dick, could you supplement my memory on the last paragraph on p. 2 about how the "non-group" functioned after my departure from Vietnam?

R. W. Komer

DRAFT
RWK
10/22/69

TO: List

SUBJECT: NOTES ON GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION #1--HOW WE ORGANIZED (sic) TO MANAGE THE VIETNAM WAR

Of all the *ad hoc* arrangements in the unfortunately *ad hoc* Vietnam war, none was more so than the top management of it. This factor has been noted in several of my many observers, and what follows is largely a personal testimonial by one insider who sought in a modest way to do something about it.

Soon after I took over as Presidential Assistant for the "other war" in Vietnam in May 1966, it dawned on me that I was the only even quasi-senior official in Washington charged full-time with even a part of the Vietnam problem. Indeed my own appointment to a unique White House job (with an NSAM charter to "supervise"--not just coordinate--the non-military aspects of our Vietnam effort) reflected the President's concern over the lack of impact of multiple, often-conflicting agency efforts. To my knowledge, no one else down to Deputy Assistant Secretary level was spending full-time on this increasingly painful problem area. In State the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southeast Asia had Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand (perhaps also Burma) to contend with. In ISA the Deputy for the Far East Region covered even more territory and the senior Vietnamese was a colonel. Similarly in the JCS structure there was no general or flag official to my knowledge exclusively charged with Vietnam. I believe the same held true for the services. In CIA there was a group headed by the redoubtable George Carver, directly under the DCI, but no senior management official till one got fairly far down the chain. Of course, numerous top officials from the President on down

were spending a large portion of their time on Vietnam problems, but the point is that no one but myself was fully focused on it.

I brought this lack to the attention of the President and other top officials, but soon realized that unless I came up with a solution, complaining wasn't going to do much good. Hence in late 1966 I took advantage of the advent of Nick Katzenback as the new Under Secretary of State to propose a sub-Cabinet level group chaired by him as *primus inter pares* to meet at least weekly and thrash out key issues for presentation to the top. I proposed that this group be kept very small, keep no minutes or records except for papers produced, and remain as invisible as possible lest it become a press target. Since Katzenback was a new man known for his objectivity, his being chairman would avoid stirring up jurisdictional jealousies.

With McNamara's strong support the President approved and the "non-group" began meeting as I recall toward the end of 1966. Members were Katzenback, Vance, Rostow, and myself. We did take up the real issues; unfortunately, however, the press of other business made it difficult to get meetings called on a consistent schedule.

After I was sent to Vietnam as Chief Pacification Adviser in May 1967, the non-group was further structured by addition of the Chairman, JCS, DCI (?), and a note taker. It met somewhat more frequently. . . . . .

My analogy in proposing the non-group was to Churchill's small war cabinet in World War II; however I felt that it would be infeasible to get a Cabinet-level group to meet consistently (it proved hard enough with a sub-Cabinet group).

The only other systematic war cabinet type of session was of course the famed "Tuesday luncheon." Having attended many of these, I can attest that they were primarily devoted to Vietnam. During my tenure in Washington through early 1967, however, they did not normally include the Chairman, JCS or DCI. Rostow attempted manfully to produce agendas for the Tueday luncheon but they often were not followed.

To my admittedly imperfect knowledge, there were no other top level efforts to structure and systematize the Washington management of the Vietnam war. I attribute this to the personal styles of the President and his top advisers who preferred more informal arrangements. There was much merit in this; to be effective, one must organize around the styles and preferences of the key actors in the decision process.

True, the Army PROVN study (and perhaps a few others) recommended a top level "chief of staff" in the White House to manage on behalf of the President all aspects of our Vietnam effort, but I gather that this study got short shrift at higher levels in the Pentagon (it did contain many cogent recommendations on unifying pacification management which I sought to carry out). The chief technique for organizing decisions on Vietnam during the McNamara tenure revolved around the Secretary's periodic visits to Vietnam. He almost invariably had several key issues in mind before he went out and his report to the President on his return (frequently drafted in part on the eve of the trip) provided the vehicle for key decisions. It was a very impressive, if *ad hoc*, technique. In sum, there was no systematic machinery for flushing up issues, identifying options, and monitoring execution in the Vietnam war--at least during the period of my involvement, May 1966-November 1968. Even with the wisdom of hindsight, I am not prepared to say that this was a critical lack. Would a more systematic approach,

would even a full-time chief of staff or chief coordinator in the White House have resulted in better identifying of key issues, better decision-making, or better monitoring of performance (or non-performance). In the last analysis, decisions would still be made in the style and at the pace of the key protagonists. Yet I cannot help but feel that greater full-time focus on Vietnam by at least a few senior officials, and some institutionalization of the decision-making process by periodic and frequent sessions could not have done much worse and might have done much better. Could one generalize that we did not take Vietnam seriously enough and organize systematically enough to cope with it until it assumed such tragic proportions that it was too late to achieve a satisfactory outcome?